

Photographing Flowers and Other Natural Things

The virtue of the camera is not the power it has to transform the photographer into an artist, but the impulse it gives him to keep on looking--and looking.

*Brooks Atkinson
Once Around the Sun*

Nature photography is one of the more enjoyable fields of photography. Unlike golf that makes "... a good walk spoiled" (Mark Twain) it enhances a walk and knits tightly with it. It may take longer to get somewhere, but the time is more enjoyably spent because you are more aware to the world around you.

Although you can take nature pictures with any camera, once you get serious about it, you'll find that certain equipment gets you better results.

▲ Basic equipment

I've been photographing wild flowers and other small natural objects for a number of years. I currently use the following equipment:

📷 Lenses include a [Canon](#) 100mm macro lens with extension tube and a Canon 28-135mm zoom lens. I find that I use the zoom lens as frequently as the macro lens, because many flower photos work best when the flower is shown in context. When using a point and shoot type digital camera, I use both normal and macro modes, depending on how close I want to get.

📷 [Gitzo](#) tripod. I happen to use the Explorer 2220 aluminum version, about half the price of the carbon fiber version. I Choose it because you can rotate the center shaft into almost any position. This does two things. It gets the center shaft out of the way so you can spread the legs farther apart so the camera is lower to the ground. It also cantilevers the camera out to the side for better angles in some situations.



Here the central shaft of the tripod has been rotated so it's almost parallel with the ground.

📷 [Markins](#) ball head. For years I struggled with a 3-way head, mainly because the alternative, a ball head, was so expensive. With a tripod that can set the center post at any angle, I was having fits with 3 separate adjustments and a limited range of

movements. I finally laid out the cash for a Markins ball head and it has brought a great deal of pleasure into photographing in the field.

📍 L-bracket from [Really Right Stuff](#) has two mounts that let me quickly mount the camera in either the horizontal *landscape* or vertical *portrait* orientation. Normally, to move the camera into a vertical position, you have to swing it over so it hangs off to the side of the center column. With this bracket it remains centered over the tripod, a much more stable positions.



Camera in horizontal position



Camera in vertical position

📍 Various small cameras that are easier to carry. I prefer those that have a monitor that tilts and swivels. My favorite is the [Canon Powershot G5](#) but I've used a number of these cameras with good results.

📍 Backpack to carry it all together. I currently use the Lowepro Micro Trecker but am thinking of one of their [Dry Zone bags](#) because then I don't have to worry about my equipment in the rain. If the weather is at all threatening I always carry a poncho that covers the bag as well as me.

📍 Reflectors, diffusers, and [light tent](#) are all collapsible and used to control the light and block the wind. In bright sun it's nice to have a diffuser to soften it and lower the contrast.

▲ **Basic techniques**

The techniques that I use depend on the situation, but generally include the following:

📷 Manual focus is almost essential so you can position the plane of critical focus at just the right spot. In close-up photography about half of the available depth of field is in front of the place of critical focus and half behind it.

📷 Exposure compensation with autoexposure bracketing (AEB). Not all cameras have this mode but it lets you capture a series of shots at slightly different exposures. You can often specify the difference in exposure (1/3, 1/2, 2/3 or 1 full stop) and the number of exposures in the series.

📷 Sequential burst mode runs off the series of exposures as I hold down the shutter button.

📷 Self-timer or manual shutter release. Which I use depends on the situation. If it is calm with no breeze at all, I much prefer the self-timer. It eliminates any possibility of me introducing blur as I press the shutter button. If I want to get really sharp images, I also use mirror lockup. If there is any breeze, I keep my finger on the shutter button and when there is a pause in the breeze and the plant stabilizes, I press and hold it down to shoot the series. It takes practice but you can press the shutter button so smoothly and slowly that it doesn't shake the camera. I sometimes, hold it halfway down if I think the breeze is about to stop. This sets exposure and means I only have to press it the rest of the way to quickly take the pictures.

📷 To make the best use of my available depth-of-field, I compose the shot so all of the important elements fall on, or close to, the same plane.

📷 Wind & sun

Without question, the two biggest problems you have when photographing flowers is the wind and the sun; with the wind being the worse of the two. I've seen photos of wind blown photos taken at a slow shutter speed and they looked great. You can almost feel the wind in them. For most purposes however, blur is your enemy. Luckily, on most days even when there is a breeze, there will be slight pauses when it's calm. You just have to be patient and wait until just the right moment. In many cases the calm is so short you can't use the self-timer because the breeze may have resumed by the time it takes the picture.



Here, Trout Lilies were photographed in the bright sun. The shadows add some slight interest to the photo.

▲ Closeups vs. context

The way you compose an image depends partly on what your goals are. Since my primary interest is taking photos that can be used by others to identify plants, my photos are more documentary. If you are interested in being more impressionistic, there are no rules at all.



If you are taking photos so others can identify the flowers, it helps to get leaves in the photo as well.



Here is a more impressionistic photo of Lily-of-the-valley blossoms. The plant isn't always easy to identify in these kinds of pictures.

▲ Playing the angles

Shooting down is the normal angle but getting down at eye level, or even shooting up is a unique view. If you want things sharp, try to have them all fall in the same plane and have the camera parallel to that plane.



Photographing straight down often works well, especially with flowers that grow close to the ground.



Here the camera was put on the ground the the tilt/swing monitor used to compose the shot.



What's good for flowers is great for other things too. Here are two ground level views of a female snapping turtle returning to the pond after laying eggs.



▲ Flash

I use the Canon Twin Lites whenever it's dark or windy. The flash has a high speed sync mode that lets me shoot at 1/2000 to freeze plants in motion. Another advantage of flash is that you can use it in combination with exposure compensation to darken the background. In the photos below, the left one was taken with exposure compensation set to -2. The right was taken with it unchanged and set to 0. The dimmer the light and the farther away the background is, the darker it will be in the shot. This lets you get great depth of field without the background becoming a distraction. The flash also has a control so I can increase or decrease the power of the flash. By using these two controls together I have almost complete control over the lighting of both the foreground illuminated by the flash and the background illuminated by ambient light.



+2



0

▲ Backgrounds

Backgrounds make or break a photo. A flower photographed against a busy background gets lost. If the background is out of focus and soft, a sharp flower will stand out against it. Luckily, depth of field in close-ups can be quite shallow so it's usually not a problem making the background soft. You just open up to a wide aperture such as f/2 or f/3.5 and focus on the flower. Anything behind the flower will be soft and the farther away it is from the flower, the softer it will be.



Here I used a smaller camera (a Canon Powershot G5) with a swiveling/rotating monitor. I was able to put the camera on the ground for stability and look down into the the monitor to compose the image. With some cameras I would have had to lie on the ground to get the shot. Using a wide-angle zoom I was able to get the background into the photo.

One special technique is to use a light tent. I got an [ezCube](#) and cut the bottom out of it so I could position it over a flower. It not only softens and diffuses the light and cuts the wind, when positioned in the right way it gives you a uniform grey or white background. This kind of background is very easy to select in a photo-editing program, so you can remove it all together, replace it with a different color, or even cut and paste the flower into another scene. If the background is busy, this is time-consuming if not impossible.



The original photo shot using a light tent.



The photo with the background removed.



The background color changed to yellow.



Tulip pasted into another scene.

To remove backgrounds, I took a light tent that already had one side open, and cut out an adjacent side. I now have a light tent that I can place over a flower while photographing it. By changing the position of the tent or the camera, I can show the background or eliminate it entirely. The tent both diffuses the light and cuts the wind.



The light tent diffusing light on a flower.



A beach pea captured with the light tent.